

**Book Review of**  
**Yoginder Sikand's *BASTIONS OF THE BELIEVERS: MADRASAHS AND ISLAMIC***  
***EDUCATION IN INDIA***<sup>1</sup>  
**By 'Aamir Bashir**

*Madrasahs* in the Indian Subcontinent suffer from a poor image. The mainstream media in the West, as well as in the sub-continent (especially Hindu and liberal), tends to brand the madrasahs as hotbeds of terrorism and breeding grounds for extremist fundamentalists. Although the academics and intellectuals are not as harsh in their description of the madrasahs but they are characterized by a general lack of in-depth inquiry and analysis.

This book is one of the few that tries to give a firsthand account of the madrasahs based upon actual fieldwork. Yoginder Sikand (b. 1967) is an intellectual from India and the author of several works on Islam and inter-faith relations.<sup>2</sup> This book is perhaps unique in the sense that the author begins it by introducing himself quite candidly considering it “a moral obligation ... to inform the reader of my personal history and ideological position” because “one’s value orientations, and linked to that, one’s personal politics, inevitably influence what one chooses to write about and how one undertakes that task” (p xvii).

The author, a self-declared agnostic, then goes on to explain his initial interest in Islam through popular Sufism (shrine-based) which incidentally led him to do research on the *Tablighi Jama'at* followed by his becoming involved with groups promoting inter-faith harmony and dialogue. He even launched a monthly web magazine *Qalandar* (now defunct), devoted to discussion of issues related to Islam and inter-faith relations in South Asia.

The author, as part of his inter-faith efforts, has traveled throughout India visiting madrasahs and interacting with *'ulama* of different schools of thought. This has given him

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<sup>1</sup> Yoginder Sikand, *Bastions of the believers: Madrasahs and Islamic education in India*, (New Delhi, India: Penguin Books, 2005), 358.

<sup>2</sup> Sikand did his M.Phil. in sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; and a PhD in history from the University of London. He did his post-doctoral work at ISIM, Netherlands and is currently teaching at Jamia Millia University, New Delhi.

a very broad perspective from which to analyze the situation in the madrasahs, as well as their image in the outside world.

After the fateful events of 9/11, a lot has been written about the madrasahs in India. The author describes how he felt compelled to write this book after seeing the organized campaign by the Indian press to vilify the madrasahs with accusations that he knew were not correct or at best only partially correct. This does not, however, mean that this book is a piece of counter-propaganda. On the contrary, the author tries to bring forth a much nuanced description of the complex reality of madrasahs in India. Thus, we find him criticizing the madrasahs and the *'ulama* for attitudes that he considers to be obscurantist or unfit for a secular, pluralist society. We also find him, at times, giving significant attention to those who disagree with the *'ulama* and madrasah administrators.

In order to make us understand the present context the author starts with an introduction to the centrality of knowledge to Islamic Civilization and the development of the Islamic scholarly tradition. However, here he betrays his lack of proper understanding of *fiqh*, *hadith* and *kalam*. He tends to subscribe to Schacht's thesis about the early development of Islamic *fiqh* and the compilation of *ahadith*, albeit without mentioning his name. Thus, he states that "suitable *hadith* reports were generated to argue that *fuqahā'* were Successors of the Prophet" (p. 15) and that "the *fuqaha* were co-opted by political elites" (p. 13) thus giving *fiqh* "a distinctly patriarchal and feudal stamp" (p. 15). He favors *Mu'tazilis* for their rationalism vis-à-vis *Ahl as-Sunnah wal Jama'ah* indicating that according to the latter group "there was no scope for free thought in Islam" (p. 18). This understanding of his would explain why he declares in the preface; and this has been published on the back cover of the book as well; that "Madrasahs, as a rule, represent a conservative form of theology and jurisprudence that is, in many ways, ill-suited to a modern, pluralistic society. Much of what is taught in madrasahs is outdated and unscientific" (p. xxvi). This attitude of his may also help explain why people like Sikand find it hard to accept *Shari'ah*-based *tasawwuf*, even though he seems to be quite interested in shrine-based/*Shari'ah*-indifferent *tasawwuf*.

In the next chapter, the author provides a historical survey of the development of madrasahs and the Islamic scholarly tradition in India. This is followed by an account of the madrasahs in Independent India. His main focus is the madrasah system in North India. He pays considerable attention to their curriculum and tracks the changes that it has gone through since the time of its founder Mulla Nizamuddin (d.1748) through Shah Waliullah

and the founding of *Dar al-'Ulum* at Deoband up to the present era. He brings out the prominent role played by Indian *'ulama* in the struggle for Independence. Later, he contrasts North Indian tradition with the situation in Kerala (South India) stressing the diversity of the Islamic education network. Far from being limited to the *Deobandi-Bareilvi* divide, it is characterized by significant regional differences.

Reform is a subject which is very dear to him. We find him enthusiastically quoting people from within the madrasah tradition who favour reform. To be sure, he gives counter arguments as well. He comes across from his presentation as someone who sincerely wants madrasahs to reform. And he is not being condescending in his approach either. For he argues, that change has to come from within and anything forced from outside will not help. He therefore, cites several examples of many madrasahs which are adapting to the changing circumstances incorporating modern subjects in their curriculum. On the whole it could be said that strong opposition to all forms of modernization do not represent the majority of the *'ulama*. Many of them are pragmatic individuals who wish to change according to their needs but want to do it at their own pace.

Having been exposed to such debates ourselves, we may make one clarification here regarding the nature of madrasahs. Unfortunately, this is something which is not always stated clearly with the result that a lot of time and energy is wasted by proponents of reform and their respondents from the madrasahs. In fact, madrasahs (in general) represent a traditional educational system which is totally different from the modern. Unlike the Arab world, where the word "madrasah" is used for any type of school; madrasahs, in the South Asian context, are primary school, secondary school and college rolled into one. Thus, the average length of study for a madrasah student is about 10 years consisting of 8 years for *Dars-e-Nizami* and perhaps a year or two before that for preparatory studies. On the other hand, a student in the modern system spends 12 years in school followed by 4 years in college. That's a total of 16 years excluding any preparatory classes that he might have taken before his school years. Now, the dispute arises when proponents of reform, many of whom have never been to a madrasah themselves, demand changes in madrasah curriculum based upon their assumption that madrasahs are schools. Many *'ulama*, considering their madrasahs to be equivalent to colleges but without ever saying so, retort that madrasahs are meant for specialized studies of Islam; and just like it is absurd to demand that medical subjects be taught in an engineering university, similarly, it is absurd to demand that modern subjects be taught in a madrasah. Thus, these debates

generally end without producing any positive results.

The major madrasah federations/associations in Pakistan such as the *Wifaq al-Madaris al-'Arabiyyah* have realized this problem and have re-designed their syllabus in such a way that it can correspond to the modern system. Now, 8 years of basic schooling is required from a student before he can start *Dars-e-Nizami*; and completing the final 8<sup>th</sup> year of *Dars-e-Nizami* entitles one to a degree considered equivalent to an MA in Islamic/Arabic studies. However, these efforts at reform are hampered by lack of resources on the one hand and the non-cooperative attitude of the government(s) on the other hand.

Going back to the book; towards the end, the author deals with the much publicized issue of links between madrasahs and militancy. He attempts to be as objective as possible. The findings that he shares with us are very different from what the media would have us believe. It appears that even the most conservative and orthodox Indian madrasahs have little to do with the training of terrorists or brainwashing suicide bombers. A few individuals working in those educational institutions may occasionally support “extremist” ideas or organizations, but most madrasah leaders have openly condemned terrorism in the name of Islam.

In concluding, the author emphasizes the critical role that “progressive Muslims” need to play to make Islam relevant to the modern world. Here, he seems to be stuck in the “liberal trap” of hoping to transform Islam from within so that it can become something like Reformed Judaism, even though that might not be Islam anymore. But he balances it out by calling upon Hindus to seriously address the growing threat of Hindu militancy.

Notwithstanding the author’s inclinations and biases, of which he had warned us in the beginning, the book is still a very nice read especially for those who wish to have a better and more nuanced understanding of the complex reality of madrasahs in Hindu-majority India.